DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 776 CS 204 831

AUTHOR Behrens, Laurence
TITLE Competency Testing: The Precis Approach.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; *Composition (Literary); *Content Reading; Higher Education; *Minimum Competency Testing; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

A competency test for writing that tests writing competency as an interdisciplinary skill called "academic writing" has been developed at The American University. The test focuses heavily on the subject and lightly on the writer or on the writer's sensibility. It avoids asking the student to write introspective "meditations," to take and defend a moral position on a controversial issue, or to give a snap judgment on a sociological, historical, economic, or anthropological issue. On the first part of the test, students are required to write a precis of from 250 to 300 words describing a passage they have just read. In the second section, students read three or four brief selections related to a common theme and then synthesize the material in their own words and write a brief research paper. Evaluation is performed in three categories: reading comprehension, correctness, and writing quality. A passing score on each section must be achieved for a student to pass the test. (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Laurence Behrens

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED170776

COMPETENCY TESTING: THE PRÉCIS APPROACH

Laurence Behrens

The current nationwide outbreak of competency programs looks distressingly like the induced Response of the familiar S-R syndrome--the primary Stimulus being the infamous news from Princeton about the 12-year decline in SAT scores. Still, virtue can be made of necessity (the mother of pre-writing); and so, although we at The American University have duly Responded as so many others--with a newly-minted competency testing program (so new it has not yet been administered except in pilot-testing), we have done so, we believe, with a test neither dehumanized, nor trivial, nor irrelevant, a test that has won the respect and support of faculty outside, as well as inside, the Department of Literature.

Our program officially begins in Fall 1979. All incoming undergraduates (including transfers, and including A.U.'s large contingent of foreign students) will be required to pass both a writing test and a math test, as a condition of graduation. The writing test will be offered three times a year--at the beginning of the Fall and Spring semesters and at the end of the Spring semester. Normally, though, students will be expected to take it at the end of the Spring semester, after having just completed the required two semesters of composition (or Composition and Reading, as it's called at A.U). If they don't pass the test the first time, they can take it over as many times as they need to.

CS 204 831

Competency Testing: The Précis Approach

by

Laurence Behrens

Department of Literature
The American University
Washington, D.C. 20016

Students who fail will also be able to enroll (if they want to) in a new short course in writing. But the test itself is not administratively linked to the composition program; it's quite conceivable that a student could pass both semesters of composition, but fail the test--or vice versa.

The impetus for a competency testing program came from the university faculty; after a strong faculty senate mandate, a committee was created to design the test itself, along with the machinery for administering and grading it. So it was important that we on the test committee devise a test that would have credibility with the faculty at large, one that would impress them as fair, useful, and realistic. Without such credibility, the test (apart from the larger question of student writing competency) would be unable to gain broad faculty support, much less to keep it after the bandwagon years. And without that support--which meant active faculty attention to student writing, across the entire range of academic disciplines--the test itself would remain just one more arbitrary hurdle to be jumped on the way to the degree.

Active faculty support meant also that the responsibility for reading and evaluating student responses would be shared by teachers from a wide range of departments, teachers who would be willing, for instance, to participate in orientation/training sessions for the sake of standardizing evaluation criteria. In return for such active support, we on the committee recognized our obligation to approach writing competency in interdisciplinary, not just in literary terms (as composition programs themselves are often widely perceived--both by teachers and students.) The

best way to do this, it seemed to us, was to design a test based on the type of reading material, and calling for the type of written responses, that were recognizable and realistic to students, based on their experience in other college courses. In one sense, of course, it isn't possible to group all of this material into one type; but in another sense, it is possible to view at least the written responses as belonging to that type known as "academic" writing. Academic writing, curiously enough, is a type of writing for which college composition courses, long under the spell of the description-narration-exposition-persuasion paradigm, often fail to adequately prepare students. Academic writing is a type frequently identified with the conventional English Composition (or the Five-Paragraph-Theme, and its variants); but the English Composition is, in fact, only a minor subgenre of academic writing, and is rarely encountered outside the composition course itself. Certainly, it is a subgenre (together with the forms of professional writing that frequently inspire it) seldom to be encountered in the reading and writing assignments of faculty outside the English Department. Usually, only the research paper provides the composition student with experience in characteristic academic writing; and all too frequently, composition research papers turn out to be literary research papers--which helps reinforce and confirm the insularity of English Composition.

But what is meant by "academic" writing? Can it, should it be defined as a distinct genre? In rhetorical terms it can be; in practical terms it should be. Academic writing is a form of writing assigned to the writer by the audience, generally as a

requirement of the course the audience is teaching, and which will be evaluated and graded by the audience, according to how well it demonstrates the writer's knowledge of and insight into the subject under consideration, and the writer's ability to express that knowledge and insight in written language. Academic writing is writing that focuses relatively heavily on the subject, and relatively lightly on the writer--or the writer's sensibility. It is meant, for the most part, not to persuade or to "express" but to inform. Hence, it is, for the most part, referential writing.

Now the preceding may be considered a deplorably narrow, if not cynical view of academic writing (or college composition and communication); but in fact, it is the view of college writing held by most college students. Certainly, it was the view of academic writing that as an undergraduate I held myself; and I considered myself no more of a grade-grubber, and no less humanistically inclined that most of my peers. Arguably, it is the only view of college writing that justifies coercing virtually the entire freshman class to sign up for one or two semesters of freshman composition.

Our goal, then, was to test students' skills in academic writing. If followed that certain types of questions seemed particularly ill-suited to that purpose. Objective questions, to be sure, but also, paradoxically enough, "essay" questions. What's left, then? A great deal--in fact, almost all of academic writing. About the only form of writing generally not left is the English Composition. Or the "theme." Or the "essay." I'm using "essay," of course, in its dictionary sense,

the sense that defines it as "a short literary composition typically personal in approach," the sense that has unfortunately long linked it with the typical English Composition. Most college writing--the kind required by other faculty--is not to be defined in this sense, is not "typically personal in approach."

We ruled out, therefore, three common kinds of "essay" questions. One kind was the question calling for an introspective response, the kind of response that I have elsewhere called "meditations." This is the kind of question that asks the student, for instance, how some personal experience, or teacher, or book changed his or her life for the better of the worse. Or how each individual is made up of several persons, each with a distinctive personality. There is little possibility that students will be asked to write on such topics, outside of a freshman composition course; and so we thought that responses to them would not provide useful indices of academic writing competence. (Such topics are, in fact, about one step removed from "What I did Last Summer." Invitations to solipsism and banality, they are just the kind of questions that inspire our colleagues in other disciplines to regard us so patronizingly when we insist on our professionalism.)

Another kind of question that didn't seem very fruitful was the one requiring the student to take and defend a moral position on some controversial issue: abortion, for instance, or capital punishment, or registration of firearms, or the SALT agreements. The chief dangers here were overemotional, as well as predictable (one way or the other) responses; and although it was somewhat more likely that students in other

courses might be asked to write on such topics than to produce meditations, it was most unlikely that they would be expected to do so, off the tops of their heads, without a good deal of preparatory reading. In any case, the tendency of such unprepared (and therefore academically irresponsible) responses to become diatribes rendered dubious their value as indicators of writing competency.

Finally, we decided against the pop-culture question: the question, for instance, that requires of the student a snap judgement, of a historical, economic, sociological, or anthropoligical nature, on some issue. The effect of T.V. on family life; or the influence of the organization man ethic on American society; or even whether or not students should have to pass competency tests in writing before they can graduate from college. Once again, it is almost impossible for students--or anyone else--to make intelligent responses to such questions unless they have a good deal of pertinent information, and not just prejudices and instant generalities, at their fingertips (this should, in fact, be one of the prime lessons of a college education). Once again, therefore, such responses would be unreliable as indices of writing skill.

Incidentally, Educational Testing Service, in its information sheet on its English Composition Test with Essay, appeared to anticipate such problems:

> If some aspect of the topic affects the readers so that it makes it difficult for them to score the essays reliably--if it encourages trite responses, for example, or if it evokes highly emotional writing on such subjects as political assassination or abortion--the committee will reject that topic.

But after such commendable cautions, E.T.S. goes on to designate such topics for student comment as, "We must live in the present. If we dwell in the past, we will lose the present." Or how one can reconcile the apparent wastefulness of Americans with their ostensible regard for thrift and efficiency. Or, "We have met the enemy and he is us." What kind of responses (of about 250 words), except the most vapid generalizations and strained speculations, can such topics be expected to provoke? Who but a committee of English teachers would create them? How many non-English teachers would be satisfied that students' responses to such topics could serve to indicate their ability to write anything other than similar, thoroughly literary artifacts? These are topics, in fact, that only the most mature and practiced writers should attempt--preferably on their own initiative.

In the end, we decided on a format that seemed as close as we could get, on a competency test, to paralleling actual academic assignment situations, a format based on the idea of writing précis of material presented to the student at the time of testing, and on the idea of synthesizing related source material into a single, coherent account, with its own emphasis.

Our test requires the student to write two passages (not "essays") in three hours. On the first part, the student is required to read closely a relatively self-contained passage, of no more than four pages, from a typical academic textbook--the kind of material that he or she is required to deal with every day. It might be a text in history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, earth science, or any other subject that the student might take to satisfy the general education requirement. The passage

would be straightforward and unambiguous in its presentation of information and ideas. It might have as its subject, "social isolation," or the Soviet Union's entrance into World War II, or an extended definition of the term, "public opinion." The student would then be asked to write a précis of the passage in about 250-300 words, and not more than three paragraphs. The student would be instructed not to attempt to interpret, evaluate, comment on, or express an opinion on the passage--just to report, in his or her own words, what it said, retaining only the main ideas and, possibly, one or two key examples. (The student would also be instructed not to waste words by referring directly to the passage or to the author; the student was not to say, for instance, "In this pasage, the author explains that . . .".)

Clearly, this type of question, before it does anything else, tests simple reading comprehension--a skill which is, in fact, not a simple one, and which by no means should be taken for granted. Certainly, there is more to academic writing than being able to report on the content of a passage: students must also be able to analyze, to interpret, to evaluate academic reading. But they can perform none of these more sophisticated activities until they have first comprehended the reading material. And the best way to test such comprehension is to ask for an accurate summary.

Beyond the basic matter of reading comprehension, though, almost every process that we consider essential to good writing is involved in the composition of a précis. A good précis will exhibit (and these are the particular qualities on which the precis is evaluated) a clearly-focused main idea, a logical

and coherent organization, a judicious use of information (evidence), and a variety of well-written and grammatically correct sentences. Admittedly, the précis will not indicate students' abilities to select good topics or theses; but then it is not the purpose of our writing competency test to measure such abilities, essential as they are. (And if such were the purpose, it would certainly be difficult to devise a test in which these abilities could be reliably measured, since they generally must operate over longer periods of time than a test can practically encompass.) On the other hand, the précis can indicate the student's ability to select an appropriate rhetorical strategy, since a précis, to be clear, often requires a different rhetorical plan than the passage from which it is derived.

The second part of the test is, to some degree, an extension of the first part. The students are in effect asked to write a mini-research paper. They are presented with three or four brief selections related to a common theme, issue, or problem, and asked to synthesize the material in their own words. For instance, they might be presented with a section of the Congressional Record, a newspaper editorial, and a speech all on the subject of the energy crisis. The synthesis they are asked to produce might be equivalent to a section of a longer paper dealing in whole or in part with that particular issue. As on the first part of the test, students first must comprehend the material presented to them; but then, they must organize the main ideas and the key examples of the several passages into a logical and purposeful sequence. This question, then, also

tests both reading comprehension and writing skills, but at a more sophisticated level than required by part one; it demands an ability to deal with information and ideas not just in isolation, but also in the context of related information and ideas. Incidentally, even though the student is advised, as before, not to inject opinion into his or her account, there's no reason why the response should not express a point of view. The point of view, however, should be evident from the particular selection, emphasis, and thrust of the synthesized material, rather than from separable pieces of comment.

After administering such questions in pilot-testing, we learned to avoid certain, now-predictable problems. First the material presented to students has to be relatively modern (twentieth-century, at least); otherwise, students may lack the intellectual context to make sense of it, in part or in whole. Also, even though students are specifically instructed not to attempt to take a moral position on the issue in question or to paste on their own views, some topics are so emotionally loaded that it is difficult for them to avoid becoming polemical. Many students, for instance, confronted with three documents on the Mylai massacre (including a transcript of one of Nixon's press conferences), became so emotional that they were unable to deal with the subject coherently. (This is not to say, of course, that they shouldn't become emotional at such horrors, but only that the use of such material as a basis for testing academic writing competency is inappropriate. We are not attempting to test moral sensibility.)

We tried to make the evaluation procedures as uncluttered as possible, though without opting for holistic impression--which

would prevent us from articulating, in subsequent conferences with students who have failed, the particular weaknesses the evaluators found. Originally, we had two major categories: Correctness (which covered grammar, punctuation, and spelling), and Writing Quality--which was subdivided into four categories: (1) clarity and focus, (2) organization, (3) use of evidence, and (4) sentences and diction. But after we evaluated a number of tests, it became clear that we needed another category: Reading Comprehension--since we had read a good many papers that were technically correct, as well as acceptable in writing quality, but that also displayed little or no conception of the meaning or significance of the material at hand.

We now have, therefore, three main categories: Reading Comprehension, Correctness, and Writing Quality. Failure on any one of the three means failure on the test. Reading Comprehension and Correctness are evaluated either as Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. Each of the four subcategories of Writing Quality are evaluated on a four-point scale (from our study of holistic testing, we learned the value of an even-numbered scale, which forestalls resort to a comfortable mean). A passing score on Writing Quality is 10 out of a possible 16. Each paper is to be read by one grader, unless it is evaluated as Fail, in which case a second (and if necessary, a third) evaluator will be called in. We are anticipating, though, a high failure rate in the first year or two.

A few words should be said, finally, about a familiar concern associated with competency testing: that the composition course itself will become simply a cram course for the test. We don't expect this to happen, to any great extent; but

we do expect it to happen to some extent; and for this we have no apprehensions or regrets. We share the attitude of Professor Rosemary Hake in her recent (Spring/Summer 1978) Basic Writing article, "With No Apologies: Teaching to the Test." We think that the particular reading and writing skills that are necessary to pass this test are essential ones for all college undergraduates; and our feeling is shared by other members of the faculty at large that we have consulted with--the same faculty at large that established composition as a required course in the first place. Composition has been and will continue to be taught as a humanities course, a sociology course, a literature course, a linguistics course, a rhetoric course, a philosophy course, a public affairs course. But in its origins, and in its general purpose (as perceived by faculty outside the English Department), it is a service course, with a service function--a function that is not only necessary, but perfectly respectable. So even if freshman composition had no other purpose than to prepare students to pass our competency test, it would still be a course well worth taking, well worth teaching.